

# bmj.com news roundup

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## Acute care is “suboptimal,” says Royal College of Physicians

The standard of care received by acutely ill medical inpatients in the United Kingdom is below acceptable standards, says a new report on the interface between acute general medicine and critical care, commissioned by the Royal College of Physicians.

The current emphasis on specialist training of doctors rather than generic skills is not the correct approach to intensive medical management, says the report. All doctors should be trained at senior house officer level in the care of the severely ill patient, it says.

The report recommends the introduction of early warning scoring systems appropriate for severely ill medical patients.

It also advises that junior medical, nursing, and allied health professionals, such as physiotherapists, should be trained in the use of such systems.

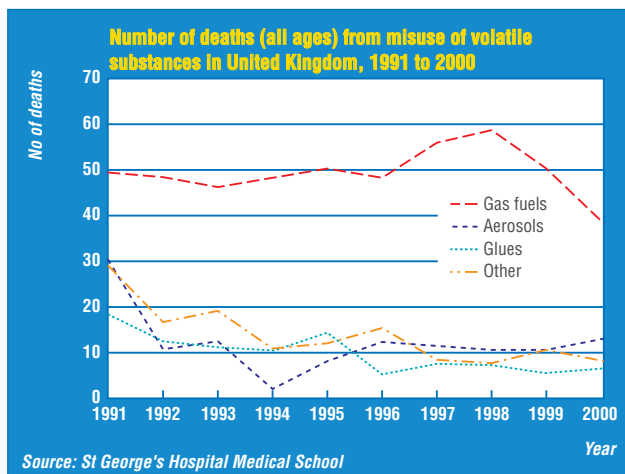
The working party that drew up the report also thought that consultant physicians should move to a dedicated on-call system where their sole responsibility was towards supporting emergency work.

The royal college has also issued a report showing that acutely ill patients often find themselves in a gap between acute medicine and accident and emergency, something partly attributed to the division between the two.

The report advises that patients would benefit from a continuum of care so that they can move safely and easily from one part of the hospital to the next.

Claire McKenna *BMJ*

*The Interface Between Acute General Medicine and Critical Care and The Interface of Accident and Emergency and Acute Medicine* are available, price £7 each, from the RCP publications department (tel 020 7935 1174 ext 358) or summaries are available at [www.rcplondon.ac.uk](http://www.rcplondon.ac.uk)



## Deaths from volatile substance misuse fall

New figures released by St George's Hospital Medical School show the lowest number of deaths associated with volatile substance misuse since 1983.

The report, compiled for the Department of Health, shows that in the United Kingdom 64 deaths were associated with volatile substance misuse in 2000, compared with 75 in 1999. Over half the deaths were associated with gas fuels, mainly butane lighter refills.

The fall in the number of deaths has been attributed primarily to the first full year of legislation banning the sale of butane lighter refills to minors, as well as continuing health and social education in schools. In 2000 the number of deaths associated with lighter fuel fell by 55% among people aged under 18, when compared with the average for the previous seven years. There were 22% fewer deaths among adults.

Samana Chaudhry *BMJ*

The report, *Trends in Deaths Associated with Abuse of Volatile Substances 1971-2000*, is at [www.vsa-report.org](http://www.vsa-report.org)

## Scientists manage to manufacture polio virus

US scientists have synthesised viable polio virus from scratch, arguably synthesising life and raising questions about biological safety, ethics, and the ability of bioterrorists to replicate the procedure.

The work was conducted by researchers from the State University of New York in Stony Brook and was funded by the Pentagon in an effort to develop measures to counter biological warfare. The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency provided about \$300 000 (£191 630 €298 531) to fund the programme over three years.

The scientists, led by Drs Eckhard Wimmer, Aniko Paul,

and Jeronimo Cello, constructed the polio virus using commercially available, mail order, nucleic acid base pairs. The nucleic acid bases can be bought as cheaply as 20 cents (12p) a piece.

They found the polio virus sequence on an internet website and reproduced its RNA sequence base by base.

The experiment has shown that viruses can be produced from scratch, including lethal viruses such as smallpox and Ebola, which could be used to manufacture viruses for use in bioterrorism.

The experiment also calls into question current vaccination and viral eradication policies. If the threat of a re-emergence of smallpox and other viruses is still present owing to synthetic introduction or otherwise, then vaccinations

should continue. Moreover, no microbe can ever be considered to be totally eradicated.

The creation of synthetic polio virus was met with concern by the biomedical community. Several notable scientists, including Dr Craig Venter, who started Celera Genetics, the biotechnology company that sequenced most of the human genetic code, called the work “irresponsible.” Others dismissed it as a stunt. Dr Wimmer defended the research, claiming that it would not promote bioterrorism, as the terrorists already had access to the same information, and that it reinforces the need to continue vaccinations.

Deborah Josefson *Nebraska*

The research has been published online at [www.sciencemag.org](http://www.sciencemag.org)

## Prison doctor should have been supervised, says inquiry

The Prison Service was sharply criticised last week by an independent inquiry into the death of a prisoner who had an asthma attack in his cell. Paul Wright, aged 33, died at Armley prison, Leeds, in 1996. The prison doctor charged with his care, Dr Kumar Narain Singh, had been forbidden to practise unsupervised by the General Medical Council.

Dr Singh was disciplined several times for clinical failings by the professional conduct committee of the GMC between 1994 and 1999. He was subject to restrictions on how and where he was permitted to practise. A GMC assessment of Dr Singh highlighted “very serious concerns” and said that “his prescribing remains inappropriate and excessive” and that “he can fail to recognise the possibility of serious illness.” Mr Wright saw Dr Singh 15 times while he was in jail.

The judge who ordered the Home Office to commission an inquiry—the first under the Human Rights Act—questioned the quality of care given to Paul Wright. Mr Justice Jackson